Report of My Visit to Syria

Following is a briefing on my visit to the friends in Syria which took place from February 29th to March 8th 2008.

Introduction:
12 years ago, and upon the request of counselor Mr. Ardekani and the NSAs of Jordan and Lebanon, I used to visit the friends in Syria with Mr. Mustafa Sabri on regular basis to deepen the friends in topics related to the needs of that period of time focusing on matters such as unity and love, administration, The Aqdas, tablets of Baha'u'llah and others which gave us the chance to get to know the friends, their issues and needs. The major threat found at that time was the great disunity among families and individuals. This program went on for three years and some fruits of unity and love were starting to be seen. Few years ago Ms Tayyebeh Jaberi pioneered to Syria and was appointed as ABM there. Her presence influenced teaching efforts among friends in Aleppo. Syrian intelligence Department interviewed friends both in Aleppo and Damascus for being active in teaching and this caused a number of Baha'is in Aleppo and Damascus to either minimize their activities or withdraw from the life of community. Recently the LSA of Damascus sent a letter to the UHJ asking for their prayers for the success of believers in their efforts to teach the faith and for the people of Syria to be more opened to the faith. The reply came from UHJ asking them to focus on two priorities: unity among friends and growth. Mr. Ardekani explained this important letter to the LSA and the friends and they read it several times during their 19 day feasts. On the day of my arrival to Damascus a meeting was held in one of the friends' homes and I was lovingly welcomed.

Objectives:
I was highly honored when I was approached by counselors Mrs. Tehrani and Mr. Ardekani to go to Syria and after several meetings I came to understand the following objectives which I should try to accomplish there:
1. To focus our efforts for this time on friends in Damascus
2. The friends to understand the 2 priorities mentioned in the above letter of the UHJ.
3. Fact finding about the teaching process and the four lines of action and collecting statistics.
4. Home visits to families to encourage them to actively be in the process or be at least supportive to their family members contributing to it.
5. Deepen their understanding of the family groups. Encourage those who have completed one or more of Ruhi books to proceed along the sequence of courses.
6. Run a workshop on the importance of Devotional Meetings with the aim of starting regular DM in each family.
7. Accompany the ABM of Syria Ms Jaberi in my visits to gain experience and for follow-up.

Findings, actions and Comments

1. **The letter of UHJ**: It was read several times since the time they received it. No practical steps followed. During the first general meeting and home visits, we discussed the letter and focused on the major vital parts of unity and growth and how to turn them into practice.
2. **Unity among friends**: This became among my priorities as it was disappointing to see that the level of this unity is superficial and the friends had disagreements and accusations and negative atmosphere superseded the 19 day feast which I attended on my second day. The above mentioned intelligence interviews had their severe effects on the unity of friends as accusations of collaboration were rumored among them both in Aleppo and Damascus. One of the previously active families, Mr. Samer Hamadani's, is not attending any activities and refused to meet me and ABM Jaberi. We focused on this vital unity issue during our visits to families.
3. **Institute Process**: Knowledge, understanding, awareness and hence practice of the 4 lines of action is low among friends. Scattered teaching efforts were noticed. Many did not know who the coordinator was. Mrs. Ala'a (Hiba) Ibrahim an Iraqi residing in Damascus with her family said she is the coordinator then I found out that she was no more the coordinator but no one informed her of that. 10 friends finished book 7 (but not book 5). No Study Circles are running at the moment with friends or non-Baha'is. No Children Classes or Junior Youth or regular Devotional Meetings are carried on. During our meetings and home visits we deepened the friends understanding of the family groups project.
4. **Youth**: We had a meeting with the youth where 7 youth came out of 9 in Damascus. One young girl was sick and the other was from the Hamadani. Great potential is in this group of people. We read and discussed several of Baha'u'llah's and UHJ's writings concerning the youth. We started by talking about the first priority of unity and their role then we had a workshop on DM and then ABM Ms Jaberi presented Anna presentation to them. The role of youth in the new plan was put into action and emphasis was put on the lines of action and the importance of going up the sequence of Ruhi courses. 4 wanted to do the JY animator's course either in Amman or Syria. All were happy and committed to start DM within their families this coming week. Most of them finished book one only and wanted to restart from beginning. At least 2 Study Circles were decided upon with dates, times and tutors and everyone joined. We chanted some Baha'i songs while holding hands during one of songs. The spirit was great and everyone designed his personal development plan and all went out with thoughts focused on their friends, relatives, neighbors and colleagues. Later they talked how highly they are energized with a new spirit and willingness to serve.
5. **Devotional Meetings**: Established in all families visited, accordingly at least 5 DMs are expected. The youth attended the above mentioned workshop and promised to follow-up with their families and make it a base for inviting receptive people from the 4 categories of their

contacts. Many thoughts and feelings were shared. It was a highly motivating session and interactive participation level was great.

6. **Junior Youth & Children Classes**: Only one Baha'i junior youth (Iqan Abdalla 12 years) and three children are among the Damascus community (Narmin, Nour, Nouroz and a baby Redwan are children of Eyad Ibrahim). The friends do not know what they should do and how to do it. Support is needed here to give proper training to some youth to carry on with this process. I suggest two of the youth to attend JY animator courses or an active animator to visit Syria soon. Same should be done on the level of Children Classes.
7. **Home Visits**: ABM Ms Jaberi could not come from Aleppo until Wednesday afternoon because of her sickness and due to some miscommunication with her. I visited 3 families with Ms Sabah Tahhan and 4 with Ms Tahhan and Ms Jaberi. I decided to focus on families with youth this visit. We were highly welcomed and they encouraged us to come more. The meetings were focusing on unity and engaging ourselves in the process, understanding the process and getting information about each family and their progress in the sequence of courses. Then to encourage them to go ahead with these courses. The prevailing atmosphere during all the visits was very positive. DMs were promoted and fixed in most of the families. We Managed to establish the Cycle in two Families (Parween Abdalla and Mofeed Tahan).
8. **Meetings with ABM**: We had two formal meetings and several more small ones during the few days we were together. We discussed the whole Syrian situation and the letter of UHJ and what should be done to keep the engine moving. We pointed out points of strength and weaknesses and prepared some plans accordingly. We discussed the issue of the Coordinator and its importance at this stage and a possible name for the newly coming coordinator to replace Mrs. Ala'a. ABM asked to send her a briefing about the responsibilities of the coordinator. Ways for following up with families and individuals were discussed in addition to the level of our mutual cooperation. Ms Jaberi joined me in visiting 3 families and collected all the information, statistics and new commitments of the friends.
9. **Coordinator**: as mentioned above, friends did not know exactly who the coordinator was and Mrs. Ala'a told them that she is the one, then I understood that she was relieved from coordination some time ago. ABM told me later that due to some problems she was really relieved but not informed. We consulted together on that issue and thought to postpone any announcements until next Redvan when a new one will be appointed to avoid any extra confusion in the matter. Next day Mrs. Ala'a asked ABM about this and she was told she will be changed by end of this year (Redvan).
10. **Aleppo**: I had a unique chance to meet the Farawati family (Khaldoun and his wife Asma'a) when they came with Ms Jaberi from Aleppo. The wife has finished book 4 and she considers herself a Baha'i. Ms Jaberi spoke highly of their activities and their faith. We discussed the teaching potentials in Aleppo which they thought was great and then their participation in Ruhi books which was stopped and ways to carry

on. We discussed the prevailing circumstances and the new developments in Aleppo and their repercussions on the friends and the teaching process. Their faith and steadfastness in facing their highly disunited community is fantastic. I promised to visit Aleppo in my next visit to Syria.

Action Plan:

Objective	**Accomplishments**	**Things to be done yet**	**Follow-up**
Understanding the 2 priorities stated by UHJ in the letter to LSA	Two opportunities in 2 meetings with the friends and during 6 home visits	Two families were not visited. Isfahani who were in Egypt and Hamadani. Other individuals are yet to be visited next cycle	Habib
Fact finding: Collecting info and statistics	Info and statistics were collected and new potentials /commitments recorded	These statistics should be checked again and again and recent developments recorded	Habib, ABM, Coord
Proceeding in the Sequence of courses	2 Book1 with 6 friends 1 Book 6 with 3 friends 1 Book 7 with 4 friends	Follow up is highly needed here with material…	Habib, ABM, Coord
DM Workshop and establishing it in families	Workshop done successfully At least 5 Family decided DMs	Other families and individuals are yet to be followed up	Habib, ABM, Coord
Accompany the ABM	Partially done ABM accopmpanied me in the last 3 days.	ABM needs more support and more accompanying should be done	Habib
Establishing Cycles whenever possible during these visits	Two opportunities were foreseen and I took the initiative to start Cycles with Mofeed Tahhan and Parween Abdalla Families	Achievements of this trial should be revised and learn from them and try to start more Cycles next visit to Syria	Habib, ABM
Study Circles & Devotional Meetings with non-Bahai's	3 SCs with 3 new believers book 1(Ala'a, Parween, and Nazaneen) 2 DMs with non-Bahais (Naz &Mofeed)	Close follow-up and encouragement is needed	Habib, ABM
JY and Children Classes	Despite the fact that there could be potential, we did not focus much here. Friends are not acquainted with tools and skills	A lot is still to be done here. Next visit should take care of this vital	Habib

	needed. Iqan is the only JY and has good potential.	opportunity. Friends should be nominated to attend related courses.	
Follow-up on achievements	We made sure all steps and dates are clear to the active friends. We exchanged mobile numbers and email addresses	During coming 3 months ABM will follow up by more home visits and using emails and I should do this using emails	Habib, ABM

Some encouraging stories:

- During our visit to the family of Onfowan Abdalla, we invited the families of his two Baha'i sisters, Parween and Nazeneen, to join us. Onfowan himself is not involved in the process, despite the fact that he is the chairman of LSA, he was not convinced of the project. The house was full with other non-Baha'i relatives who have good relations with the Baha'i family but we thought it would not be wise to open the kind of discussion we were planning in this visit. After a while Onfowan politely asked the other members of the family to leave the room and asked us to proceed. He was very anxious to listen to what motivated his daughters in the youth meeting who came back with stories and plans. With the help of Baha'u'llah, the meeting turned to be one of the best we attended with emotions and energy prevailing. Then Nazeneen (one of the sisters whom we met her daughter earlier) told us that few months ago she and her daughter met a taxi driver who was interested in the faith. He invited them to his house where he introduced them to his sisters and asked for a book. They gave him the book and he promised to call. Nothing happened until two days ago when he suddenly came to Onfowan's house and wanted to know more and they invited him to a DM first and then a SC next week.

- Aveen is the daughter of Parween Abdalla she does not attend any Baha'i activities since years now. The visit to this family was with few hopes of being able to accomplish something there but Baha'u'llah had something else to say. The family consists of the mother and two daughters Aveen and Iman. Aveen looked depressed and unwilling to join any teaching activity. Financial problems were among Aveen's priorities. We prayed together and her sister chanted a self composed song for Baha'u'llah and we could see the change on the face of Aveen. To my surprise we (me and Ms Tahhan) left the house after starting a Cycle where Aveen was in the center of it and promised to join the youth meeting three days later. She thought of her list of friends and came up with two candidates for DMs and eventually SCs. On the last day of my visit we met in her uncle's house and Aveen was totally

changed and told us that one non-Baha'i friend will take book one with the family this week.

- Eyad Ibrahim and his wife Ala'a (some call her Hiba) are an Iraqi family who came to Syria with 4 young kids. Ala'a was the coordinator and she looks very active. On the 19 day feast, she told me about her husband and that he does not like to share any meeting or activity and no activities are permitted in his house. She asked if we can help in this concern. We visited the family and prayed then the usual program was carried on. The husband talked openly about the disunity among the friends and that he used to come out from 19 day feasts with negative spirit and depression due to the disunity among friends there. We discussed the issue and his role in this respect and that he should take the responsibility and influence the change. At the end he looked convinced and told us about his neighbor who has been asking about the faith and read a book then wrote a letter to Eyad praising the faith and its principles. Eyad was very happy with the DMs suggested to them and decided to invite the neighbor soon. I received an email today from Ala'a telling me they invited the man and he will attend DM this week.

SWOT Analysis of Damascus Area:

Strengths	**Weaknesses**
• The friends are very faithful and devoted • The youth are highly receptive and want to start • 10 tutors • A number of active non-Syrian Baha'is living there	• Disunity among the friends • Gossip • Tutors are not active • Distant ABM residence • No active coordinator • low number of friends / 32 in total • Only one JY • 3-4 children of an Iraqi family who could leave any time • The high level of unmarried girls!!!
Opportunities	**Threats**
• The support of the Counselors • The recent letter of UHJ to LSA • The receptivity of the people • The Secularity System • Officials have positive attitude	• New pressure from government • The withdrawal of some families in both Damascus and Aleppo from Baha'i activities • Shift of priorities: Life becoming more difficult and expensive. People spend more

	time working

Suggestions:

- Coordinator: needed and could be chosen next Redvan. This gives a chance to choose one from among the active friends in the coming period. Mrs. Parween is a candidate.
- Omid Qa'em Maqami: He is an American/Iranian studying Arabic language in Syria. He is an excellent element. He is cheerful, kind and loving, besides, he is an active tutor and can speak good Arabic. He could be a coordinator.
- JYSEP Course: a number of young people are ready to take JYSEP either in Syria or Jordan.
- Children: Same as with the JY.
- Strong family in Damascus: Send a strong Baha'i family to Damascus will help the community to change.
- Next visit should include Aleppo for one day or two.
- Next visit try to join individuals who have no families in a group of spiritual family. (6 candidates)
- Focus should continue on youth.

I thank you again for this great opportunity and most humbly and eagerly ask to keep the friends in Syria and me in your prayers.

Please do not hesitate to ask in case you have any questions and send your needed comments, advices and suggestions.

With loving Baha'i greetings,
Habib